

TESTIMONY ON HCR 28 FOR HOUSE LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE  
December 6, 2016

Mr. Chairmen and Members of the Committee,

My name is Rev. Alice Fleming Townley, I speak against House Concurrent Resolution No. 28. I oppose the resolution because it asks Congress to stop refugees from being able to come to the United States while our country reviews and changes the vetting process. Review and modification can be done without refusing to accept people who are fleeing from persecution and tremendous danger.

My father, Rev. George Fleming, has incurable cancer and a year ago, he called for a party and invited everyone he had ever known. Hundreds of people streamed into their rural church in Casco, Michigan—family, friends, neighbors, people from all his parishes and even his kindergarten teacher. In the middle of the afternoon Dad stopped his party, for he had spotted them. He announced over the microphone, “I just want you all to know, Tran and Steven are here.”

After the Vietnam War, my parents served the Chapel Hill United Methodist Church, in Sodus, part of the fruit farming area around Benton Harbor, Michigan. They led the congregation in sponsoring refugee families. Then members of the community who owned Ace Hardware heard about this and did the same. Tran had been a translator for the Americans during the Vietnam War and saved many American lives. When our country pulled out, it was too dangerous for him to stay. Tran and his wife Lap came to be our

neighbors, and then had baby Steven, and Tran worked at Ace Hardware for decades. They came to church with us and my Mom and I would entertain little Steven in the front pew by drawing him pictures. We went to parks and parades, and as children we traded our bologna sandwiches on white bread with the crust cut off for egg rolls filled with steaming carrots and cabbage.

Tran came to Dad's party in November, driven many hours by Steven who was now tall, confident, and capable, with his wife and their two babies. My father announced their arrival as if they were royalty. Some voices would call refugees then and now, 'burdens.' In contrast, journeying with these families has led us more deeply into courage, love and gratitude.

My father was influenced by his parents who had sponsored refugees from Latvia after World War II as part of a program encouraging this in farming communities. My father and his father would often repeat stories of earlier ancestors whose house was a stop on the Underground Railroad near Adrian, Michigan.

Imagine the delight in my heart then, to become a pastor at The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, who understands that their calling is to welcome refugees. Each year we celebrate Refugee Awareness Sunday. We remember how Mary, Joseph and Jesus were refugees and fled to Egypt and someone we don't know helped them. We hear from amazing students in the Global Institute for Lansing, the school we helped create with volunteers for adult refugees to earn a high school diploma. We have joined hands with faith

communities across the greater Lansing Area to start the All Faith Alliance for Refugees for education and collaboration. This holiday season my congregation is busy gathering coats and blankets as they do each year for newly arrived families.

Last year my husband and I met a refugee family in Lansing who had recently resettled from Iraq. The father had translated for the United States military, and when the U.S. left Iraq, it was no longer safe for him to remain—much like Tran in Vietnam. We shared tea, met his lovely wife and sweet little girls, and learned he had just been hired by a U.S. construction firm that needed his language skills in their business.

This year I again purchased two coats for newly arrived refugees. When my 13-year-old daughter came home from church, she showed me the tags for additional hats and gloves and reached for her own money. “I think we can do more,” she said. From generation to generation, we in Michigan are proud to be a welcoming people.

I ask you not to move HCR 28 forward and would be pleased to answer any questions.